

Mezentius – the man you hate to love

Bob Cowan

Villains are surprisingly rare in Classical Literature. Of course, there are enemies of the state whom any good Greek or Roman would want to see defeated, figures whose passions drive them to commit terrible crimes, traitors who threaten not just their country but its very way of life. Yet even these are complicated figures with redeeming features, wicked only in a wicked world. The Carthaginian general, Hannibal, for example, is a cruel, cheating barbarian in the eyes of the Romans, but is also strangely merciful, noble and generous, a worthy enemy who reflects the greatness of the Rome he threatens; Medea is a manipulative, murderous witch, but one whose barbarism is more than matched by the cruel treatment she receives from 'civilised' Greeks; Catiline is a ruthless revolutionary, but has all the qualities of a tough, warlike, charismatic Roman, showing how easily Roman greatness can turn to the bad. None of these is as thoroughly terrible as say the brutish Bill Sykes in *Oliver Twist* or the evil Hannibal Lecter.

Yet it is precisely this combination of cruelty, violence and self-consciousness which Virgil sets up in his pantomime villain, Mezentius. Here is a character ripe to be booed off the stage, a symbol of every quality which *pious Aeneas* lacks, detests and must get rid of, if 'Good' – or Rome, which is almost the same thing – is to triumph. Why then does Virgil change our view of Mezentius from that of an impious, bloodthirsty tyrant into an old, tired, grief-stricken, animal-loving, bereaved father? Why does the poem make us love the man we should hate? As always with the *Aeneid*, there are no easy answers, but the questions will go a long way to shaping our view of the whole poem.

Imagine there's no heaven

Mezentius' defining feature is that he despises the gods. He is called *contemptor diuum* even before we know his name when he is introduced for the first time in the catalogue of Turnus' allies. When the same phrase is used to describe him at the start of book 8, it becomes his key characteristic, like those we find in the epithets used to describe Homer's swift-footed Achilles or even Virgil's own *pious Aeneas*. There may be a hint here at an earlier tradition about Mezentius whereby he agreed to help Turnus only if the first fruits of the season were given, not as a sacrifice to the gods, but to him. Virgil shows us that he knows this version when he has Aeneas offer the dead Mezentius himself as a sacrifice of first fruits, but the important thing is that he chooses not to use the story. What then is the point of dwelling on Mezentius' contempt for the gods?

He is in good company. The Argonaut, Idas, and, among the 'seven against Thebes', Capaneus and Parthenopaeus, despise the gods too. It is not that they are atheists as such; they agree that the gods exist, but they simply have no need for them. And that is what links these characters: their self-sufficiency. Mezentius says that his right hand and the weapon it carries are his god. This is a markedly different world-view from that of Aeneas, whose whole life is guided by obedience to the will of the gods, even when it involves leaving the woman he loves.

Perhaps that is the point. Dido too is sceptical about the gods' involvement in human affairs. 'I suppose the gods have nothing better to do than tell you what to do', she sneers at Aeneas. Some

see this as fitting the view of Epicurean philosophers, who believed that the gods existed but were playing tennis on the other side of the universe and didn't interfere with humans, as opposed to the Stoic idea of gods who had fate all planned out. Even without getting into the philosophy of it all (for which see Catharine Edwards' piece on p.28), it is clear that Mezentius represents a world-view totally opposed to that which makes everything – from the beginning of the world to the supremacy of Augustus – part of the will of Jupiter and the design of fate. Those who represent that view are destroyed in the poem, but ideas aren't so easily destroyed.

Cruel to his kind

Mezentius is not a nice man. Evander tells Aeneas all about him. While king of the Etruscans, he massacred and tortured his own people, inventing exotic forms of torment such as tying the living to the dead until they too slowly died in the rotting flesh. Eventually the Etruscans rose up against him but he escaped; the desire to capture him, the old king adds, would make them good allies against Turnus. The abominable cruelty of tyrants to their own people, is all too familiar to us from Chile, Iraq and all too many other countries. The fear of a tyrant was as strong in Virgil's Rome as in Santiago or Baghdad.

This is why such a big theme of the *Aeneid* is what makes a good ruler. Dido seems to be one, but abandons her duty to her people for love; Latinus is wise and just, but also weak and unable to stand up for wisdom and justice against the forces of chaos; Aeneas, of course, is 'work-in-progress' and the whole poem explores how good a ruler he is. Mezentius here is shown to be the worst of all. When we feel a lump in our throat as he mourns his son and talks to his faithful horse for the last time, we must never forget the victims whose faces he bound to the rotting flesh of corpses. Yet that is also the most amazing thing about Mezentius. We don't forget all this but we still get that lump in our throats. Why?

Fathers and sons

The other crucial thing about Mezentius is that he is Lausus' father. In the catalogue, more space is devoted to Lausus than his father and we are told that he was worthy of a father who wasn't Mezentius. Anyone who has read the *Aeneid* knows how central fathers and sons are, and this is no coincidence. The whole poem is centred on inheritance from father to son, from Anchises all the way to Augustus. Any women who assist the process by bearing sons are minor characters, any who interfere are shunted aside. This is why Creusa, Dido and Amata die, and why Lavinia never speaks a word in the whole poem. This is the vertical line of patriarchal descent which we see in the famous image of Anchises being carried on Aeneas' shoulders with Ascanius running below. The wife followed behind. Mothers are not important; fathers are. As with kings, however, there are good fathers and bad fathers. Book 10 explores which sort Aeneas and Mezentius are.

When Turnus kills Evander's son, Pallas, he sets in motion the chain of events which eventually ends in his death. He begs

Aeneas to pity his father Daunus and think of his own father Anchises. Instead Aeneas feels a son's duty towards Evander and a father's guilt towards Pallas. We get a foretaste of this in book ten when Magus doubles the stakes: I'm a father, think of Ascanius; I'm a son, think of Anchises, he pleads. But since Turnus killed Pallas, all bets are off, says Aeneas, then kills him and two further suppliants. We cannot but think back to the death of Priam and forward to that of Turnus.

Yet Aeneas does feel fatherly emotions. When Lausus defends his retreating, wounded father, Aeneas warns him off. Your *pietas*, your love for your father, deceives you, he says, denying the very quality which defines him throughout the poem. Lausus does not listen and is killed. Then Aeneas' rage turns to pity as he sees how Lausus died to save his father, an image of his own *pietas*. Virgil here calls him *Anchisiades* (a word which defines him as the son of Anchises) – a masterstroke. This is not Aeneas the warrior, or Aeneas the king, but Aeneas the son who sees a son's love for his father and weeps.

Meanwhile – Virgil cinematically pans to a peaceful riverbank – Mezentius is tending his wounds. He too is referred to not by name, not as general, soldier or tyrant, but simply as *genitor*, father, the only rôle which matters to him as he desperately asks for news of his son and, poignantly, a rôle he no longer has. When he sees his son's body, this cruel tyrant becomes a tired old man as Virgil for the first time refers to his white hair. He angrily blames himself for his son's death and more, for the shame which his crimes had brought to his son's name. The self-sufficient *contemptor diuum* realises that he was dependent, dependent on his love for his son. Now that son is gone, he has nothing left to live for.

The reader's sympathy for Mezentius has by now grown from nothing to what seems a climax but, as every film-director knows, a scene with an animal always adds the finishing touch. Mezentius talks to his faithful, old horse, Rhaebus, whose Greek name means bandy-legged, no magnificent steed, but a broken old warrior like his master. We are meant to think here of the Cyclops, Polyphemus, a monster famed for trying to eat Odysseus, who gains a sudden, touching humanity in Homer's *Odyssey* when pictured addressing his ram. But Virgil goes beyond this model to show us a man alone, a man whose only remaining companion is an animal who cannot answer him but with whom he will take his final journey. It is Rhaebus whom Mezentius feels would not welcome a Trojan master, Rhaebus whom Aeneas kills first before the defiant but resigned warrior – almost suicidally – offers his throat to Aeneas' sword.

Mixed feelings

Even my dull paraphrase of this amazing scene conveys, I hope, some of its pathos. So we return to the question of why Virgil should make the exceptionally villainous Mezentius exceptionally sympathetic. How we read Mezentius will say a lot about how we read the *Aeneid*. Certainly the tyranny and cruelty which, in spite of his moving death, he still represents, are qualities which Rome's founding father must destroy. Yet this still doesn't explain why he should be so sympathetic and, as a result, Aeneas so unsympathetic in killing him.

I'm not going to provide an answer here – Virgil seems dead set on *not* putting our minds at rest. It can be all too easy to paint a cuddly Virgil who cries over Aeneas' and Rome's victims at the same time as he plunges the sword into these necessary sacrifices of progress. It's easy to be big-hearted when you've already won. Perhaps we are relieved that, for all his unexpected humanity, the monstrous Mezentius has been destroyed. Or perhaps – rather differently – we feel that an individual who did not play by the rules of fate but who loved his son passionately is preferable to a dutiful instrument of empire. We should certainly try to imagine how a Roman would read Mezentius, how he would read the *Aeneid*, but that doesn't mean we have to agree with him. The power of the reader is that each of us can decide.

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